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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 001068

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM KDEM SOCI PGOV PINR NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: NOBEL LAUREATE WOLE SOYINKA ARRESTED,
MEETS WITH CG

REF: A. ABUJA 849

1B. ABUJA 865

1C. ABUJA 829

Classified By: Consul General Robyn Hinson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Nigerian Police Force (NPF) arrested and later released Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka and six other human rights activists on May 15 during a rally held in Lagos opposing President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration and its policies. Soyinka later met with the CG and POLOFF on May 19 and gave his account of the rally, the mission of his new organization Citizens Forum (CF), and his assessment of Obasanjo. END SUMMARY.

LAGOS RALLY, A BUILDUP FOR CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

12. (U) Hundreds of protestors assembled at Campos Square, Lagos Island on May 15 in anticipation of Soyinka's arrival. With equal anticipation police, already present at the scene, destroyed the speaker's podium and dispersed the protestors with tear gas in advance. The protestors later regrouped and were soon joined by Soyinka and other prominent human rights activists including Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti, and Femi Falana. Soyinka told us that police again fired tear gas into the crowds and then arrested seven rally organizers, including Soyinka, by "bundling us into a meat wagon." En route to NPF Lagos headquarters, the truck was diverted and Soyinka told us he met with two police officials he knew who apologized for the arrest. He then received a call from NPF Inspector General Tafa Balogun who expressed the same sentiments and explained that he never gave orders to arrest anyone, but to only break up the rally. Within an hour, Soyinka and his colleagues were released without charge.

13. (C) The NPF has publicly denied arresting Soyinka, claiming he was merely detained. The press and the opposition Alliance for Democracy (AD) party have hypothesized that Soyinka's arrest was the work of an overzealous and newly appointed Lagos Commissioner of Police who wants to score points with Obasanjo by keeping protestors in check and exhibiting independence from Lagos Governor Bola Tinubu, who is the AD's most prominent politician. Soyinka told us that both explanations were "rubbish." He surmised that Obasanjo directed the disruption of the rally and his arrest. The President, Soyinka opined, feels emboldened by his recent successful break up of former President and recent All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari's most recent rally (ref A). "Besides, Obasanjo cannot show preference to another Yoruba man," Soyinka jested. Soyinka told us he would continue his efforts to point out the failings of the government.

CITIZENS FORUM'S GAME PLANS

14. (SBU) Citizens Forum (CF), a newly created civil rights organization founded by Soyinka and others is a coalition of human rights groups and civic organizations. CF advocates the creation of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to reverse unconstitutional enactments by Obasanjo and formulate a new constitution. On these two issues CF coalition members are in agreement. They differ, however, on whether Obasanjo and other politicians should resign from office and a National Unity Government be created. Soyinka has been erroneously quoted in the press as calling for Obasanjo's resignation. On May 19, Soyinka held another press conference to clarify his position. "I would like to see those largely fraudulent arms of governance vanish, and I may yet join in the call for their suicide. The fact, however, is that I have not yet done so. My tactical priorities for now are stemming the nation's drift towards fascism and convening a Sovereign National Conference."

15. (C) Soyinka detailed to us his vision for the SNC. He is calling for 500 participants representing human rights groups, the military, the NPF, politicians, religious groups, tribal leaders, concerned professionals, and scholars who would meet over a six month period. The SNC would be tasked

with creating a new constitution, replacing the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and addressing national issues such as ethno-religious violence, corruption, and the nature of Nigerian democracy. When pressed how he would get sitting politicians to buy into a forum that could jeopardize their legitimacy, Soyinka said there were two schools of thoughts on the issue. There are some who advocate that decisions are binding with immediate effect, creating a National Unity Government and beginning a new election cycle.

However, Soyinka advocated a binding decision that would be implemented with the next scheduled national elections of 2007. Soyinka reasoned that politicians would not feel their existing tenures threatened and those who will not have reached their term limits could run on the platform of implementing social change that they helped create. He stated that Obasanjo has been receptive to the idea in private meetings when tensions are high, but then dismisses it when situations cool.

OBASANJO, PLACATER OF THE NORTH?

16. (C) Soyinka showed disdain for many of Obasanjo's policies, which he described as unilateral and dictatorial, rising to a "level of intolerance reaching academic proportions." The recent announcement of a state of emergency in Plateau State over unabated ethno-religious violence in May (ref B) was of deepening concern to Soyinka. He was disturbed with Obasanjo's coup of suspending the governor, deputy governor, and state assembly and replacing them with a former military governor of Plateau State after Obasanjo's attempts to force the state house of assembly to impeach the governor failed. Soyinka attributed the decision to Obasanjo's political precariousness in light of increasing national instability and his habitual placation to northern sentiments, which Soyinka claims dates to Obasanjo's career in the military.

17. (C) Kano and Delta States, Soyinka argues, should have had states of emergency enacted several times under Obasanjo's rubric for justifying that of Plateau. Soyinka pointed out the recent Kano riots (ref C) and its history of being a manipulated flashpoint of religious violence as a more probable justification for a suspension of the state government, but believes this has been purposely ignored by Obasanjo. Soyinka thinks Obasanjo may use the threat of a state of emergency to keep erring governors in check or in an attempt to wrest power from the AD in Lagos, which Soyinka described as an insolent state that the president's party has been enviously eyeing.

18. (C) COMMENT: Soyinka made it clear to us that he is ready to return to the national arena of civil disobedience and be active in producing social change in Nigeria. He currently is setting up a literary institute at the University of Nevada - Las Vegas, but intimated that it was not too demanding on his time. He has since returned to the United States and is making arrangements to be permanently based in Lagos, commuting to Nevada when needed. As instability and public dissatisfaction increases, the message of Soyinka and his colleagues and their continued efforts to demonstrate against the Obasanjo administration will keep this Nobel Laureate in the news for sometime to come. END COMMENT.
HINSON-JONES